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I don't know what I'm looking for but I'll know it when I see it.

Andrew Sneddon

Abstract

The cultural geographer and philosopher David Harvey suggests that like space and time, place is a social construct and the only interesting question left to be asked on the subject is by what social process(es) is place constructed.

This paper sets out to explore the construction methods employed by contemporary visual artists for whom Place is central to their practice. Specific approaches are historically retraced revealing our understanding and desire to explore methods of representing place and how this enquiry has influenced our renewed contemporary interest and understanding of place. It is not possible to separate any study of place from that of space as both are intrinsically linked and are often interchangeable in literature and speech, therefore it becomes important to explore this relationship in some depth. The representation of place inheres many social and political forces, which form it and continue to condition our understanding of place. If place functions as a manifestation of those associations, then by extension, the space experience of an artwork could be said to reside within the realm of place; space by virtue of our experience of it, of what we bring to it is afforded the significance of place.

Through the study of particular artist's and artworks such as Antony Gormley's *Angel of the North* (Gateshead) and Jeremy Deller's *Battle of Orgreave* (Sheffield), two similar in theme but very different approaches to place making and representation of place would be considered. The paper also allows for thoughts to emerge and tested on the role serendipity and sagacity has had on the formulation and reception of these works. Both artworks created a great deal of heated public debate at the time and continue to do so and have generated a great deal of community engagement that questions and interrogates the idea of place.

Key Words:

Art, Place, Site, Displacement, Deller, Orgreave, Gormley, Angel, Assimilative, Interruptive.

This paper takes the opportunity to explore what the cultural geographer and philosopher David Harvey suggestions to be 'the only interesting question that can be asked is: by what social process(es) is place constructed?'¹ In considering

the question 'what means or processes is a sense of place created' I've been asking and exploring the same or similar questions in my own work as a visual artist and have been studying the work and practices of other artists for whom issues surrounding place have been central to their practice.

For the purpose of this conference and paper I've concentrated my attention on two specific examples of contemporary art practice that should be familiar to most (one possible more than the other) and address the broad spectrum of the conference covering disciplines of urban/human geography, history, politics, philosophy and anthropology to mention a few. By considering Antony Gormley's *Angel of the North* (Gateshead, 1998) and Jeremy Deller's *Battle of Orgreave* (Sheffield, 2001). Two similar in theme art works, both dealing with a location that has a strong sense of place within the local community but very different approaches I hope to raise issues of place-making and representation of place that have been adopted in the realisation of the works. In order to best understand how and why these artists have responded to the context in the way that they have it seems important to historically retrace these approaches revealing our understanding and desire to explore methods of representing place and how this enquiry has influenced our renewed contemporary interest and understanding of place. It is not possible to separate any study of place from that of space as both are intrinsically linked and are often interchangeable in literature and speech, therefore it becomes important to explore this relationship in some depth. The representation of place inheres many social and political forces, which form it and continue to condition our understanding of place. If place functions as a manifestation of those associations, then by extension, the space experience of an artwork could be said to reside within the realm of place; space by virtue of our experience of it, of what we bring to it is afforded the significance of place.

It is possible to trace both artist's influences from a previous generation of artists and art practices from the 1960s and early 1970s. The work of Richard Serra, Robert Smithson, Hans Haacke or Michael Asher and the art movements of minimalism, conceptualism, earthworks and institutional critique are detectable in their practices. *The Angel of the North* and *The Battle of Orgreave* cited here arguably fall under the term site-specific art. Alternative terminology that capture these approaches to practice have also been called; context-specific, debate-specific, audience-specific, community-specific, project based, public art.

This chapter sets out to chart the historical significance of the notion of place and its changing influence on the production and displacement of the art object within contemporary art practice. The contemporary artist would appear to share an investment and interest towards an understanding of how place might influence our emotions and actions with other disciplines. Disciplines such as

architecture, philosophy, geography, anthropology and sociology all share an interest towards answering the question ‘what is place?’ and ‘how can an understanding of it inform specific practices?’

Place can present as a fairly commonly used word within language and in our everyday lives, most would feel comfortable in its use and meaning, but what at first seems a benign and straight-forward noun quickly becomes multi-purpose and multi-layered and the subject of philosophical debates across many disciplines. The philosopher, Edward Casey asks us to imagine what it would be like if there were no places in the world and suggests that ‘our lives are so place-orientated and place-saturated that we cannot begin to comprehend, much less face up to, what sheer placelessness would be like’². This psychoanalytic language and thinking encourages *fear of the void* and by extension inspires anxiety and repression which may present a key factor that has attracted much attention to the subject. This is further emphasised by the geographer Edward Relph in considering the importance and need to maintain an understanding of place:

But there is nevertheless a real problem in this lack of formal knowledge of place. If places are indeed a fundamental aspect of mans existence in the world, if they are sources of security and identity for individuals and groups of people, then it is important that the means of expressing, creating, and maintaining significant places are not lost. Moreover there are many signs that these very means are disappearing and that ‘placeslessness’ – the weakening of distinct and diverse experiences and identities of places- is now a dominant force.³

I would like to pick up on Relphs use of ‘expressing’ and ‘creating’ and to add these to one of the four areas outlined for further study and development in David Harvey’s’ *The Condition of Postmodernity*. The list also features in his essay, *From Space to Place and back again: Reflections on the Condition of Postmodernity* and in *Mapping the Futures*, 1993.

2. A recognition that the production of images and of discourses is an important facet of activity that has to be analysed as part and parcel of the reproduction and transformation of any symbolic order. Aesthetic and cultural practices matter, and the conditions of their production deserve the closest attention.⁴

Any attempt to clarify or pin down ‘what place is’ is automatically met with a barrage of conflicting words and meanings, often contradictory in nature, how can place be both, village and city, home and nation at the same time? There

seems little doubt that the term place is a contested site. The immense confusion of meaning makes any theoretical concept of place immediately suspect⁵, Harvey (1993:4).

In the introduction to *Place*, 2005, Tacita Dean and Jeremy Millar suggest that 'place' is to landscape as 'identity' is to portraiture'⁶, this provides us with a significantly simple but practical suggestion as to why place is of importance to the contemporary artists. The importance and attraction of place for the contemporary artist would appear to be a natural extension of the traditions and conventions from landscape painting. This suggestion is developed further into the consideration of place as being the 'projection of history onto landscape'.⁷

Contemporary practices as explored by visual artists are no longer restricted by conventions of strict representation or topographical pictorial accuracy. Concepts of place and context have continued the legacy of the landscape tradition and this legacy can be traced back to the 1960's where we have a great number of artists and art movements such as Conceptual Art, Minimalism, Land Art and Performance beginning to articulating new thinking about practice.

The more successful work from the minimal syndrome rejected itself, allowing the viewer a one-to-one confrontation with pure limit or bounds. This displacement or sensory pressures from object to place will prove to be the major contribution of minimalist art. – Dennis Oppenheim, 1969.⁸

The displacement of the art object often refers to the questioning and removal of the object away from the dominant authority of the gallery or museum towards alternative and usually oppositional spaces. The gallery/museum as sole context has habitually determined the final destination of the artwork and has had equal say in determining its final definition of form and shape. A more pluralistic and critical questioning of the environment in which the viewer is confronted by or invited to discover the work began to emerge in the 1960's and seems to have influenced a generation of artists and cultural thinkers about the production and meditation of contemporary art practice. This period can also be seen as the birth of the participating viewer and the beginning of the demise of the passive viewer.

In order to fully appreciate the current context of place and the contemporary artwork and its not too distant forefathers it would be beneficial to undertake a review of the history of place and its relation to space by a close analysis of two contemporary key thinkers on the subject. Both David Harvey and Edward Casey have written on this history towards creating an awareness that helps us understand the significance of key attitudes and how these attitudes have

influenced our contemporary views on the subject with particular emphasis paid to the visual arts.

Antony Gormley's Angel of the North was installed on a hillside on the south side of Gateshead greeting road traffic on the A1 and rail commuters on the East coast line on 15th February 1998. It was conceived as a landmark sculpture to mark the approach into Gateshead and the site of the former Teams Colliery baths was decided upon very early on. The area had been mined from the 1720s and only ceased to be mind in the late 1960's. Gurley described the location for the sculpture as;

"The lower Team Valley is not an idealised landscape, it is a working place where agriculture, farming, light industry, road, rail, terraced housing and flats, open ground and football fields contribute to its character. I hope that the work will add something to this diversity of activities, not dominating but working with the scale and robustness of the marshalling yards, the motorway, the valley itself and the multiplicity of its human uses."⁹

The sculpture has achieved its goals of creating a positively impact on social exclusion issues, create civic pride, regeneration of the local economy and improve the general quality of the region to inward investors. At the cost of £800,000 much of this support was allocated by the Arts Council Lottery fund (£584, 000), the European Regional Development Fund (£150,000), Northern Arts (£45,000) and the shortfall was found by local business sponsorship. In return, according to Gateshead Council this public art project is credited with being the catalyst in creating an estimated £600m of urban development for the region. This would include the £22m Gateshead Millennium Bridge linking Gateshead to the Newcastle Quayside, which opened in 2001. The Baltic: Centre for Contemporary Art who opened their doors in 2002 and the £70m Sage Gateshead music centre by Sir Norman Foster & Partners, which opened in 2004. Along with audience viewing figures or the number of people *seeing it in passing* from the road and railway is believed to be in the region of 90,000 people every day, which is more than one person every second or 33 million people every year. In addition Gateshead Quays is one if the largest urban regeneration programme in Europe and it is now acknowledged that these developments would not have progressed without the catalyst of major art projects, for example, the Angel of the North. It's difficult to argue that The Angel of the North is not a runaway success story and a credit to all involved in the project. It's now recognised as an icon and symbol of regeneration, both regionally and nationally with many visitors from overseas wanting to know how the Gateshead Council achieved this.

The almost eight years of planning, fund raising and outreach educational programmes, artists talks and public debate combined with media coverage have contributed to the projects success and an increased awareness of place and an renewed attachment to the locale by locals. The education program that ran throughout the whole process involved around 1,400 school children and has secured an understanding and appreciation for generations to come. A further unplanned but nevertheless significant happening occurred on the May 13th 1998 when The Angel was draped in a 9-metre long replica of Alan Shearer's Newcastle United No.9 football shirt during United's appearance in the 1998 FA Cup Final.

This single event could be recognised as an acceptance of the contemporary artwork. An acceptance that wasn't always present. In the early stages of the project the projected cost was considered by the majority of locals as being too high and should have been better spent directly on social projects such as housing hospitals or job creation. But, as the project neared completion it was understood that the funding could not have been transferred and that no local taxes were spent on the sculpture.

As a model for public art and constructing a sense of place it's fairly robust and would suggest itself as a model or benchmark to other councils and arts organisation. One only need to think of Juame Plensa's *Dream* from 2009, set high on top of Sutton Manor Colliery near St Helens and again overlooking the busy M26. Or, Mark Wallangers monumental sculpture of a lifelike white horse. The sculpture will sit next to the A2 in Kent near Ebbsfleet, which over the next 25 years is due to see regeneration in the shape of more than 10,000 new homes. The landmark will be visible to travellers as they pull out of Ebbsfleet International train station bound for the continent, and to motorists as they drive to and from Dover. This could become Britain's largest piece of public Sculpture. At cost of £2m, it will be more than twice as expensive as Antony Gormley's Angel of the North. At 50 meters, it will be well over double the angel's height. At the time of writing this paper another piece of public art is announced for the border crossing between England and Scotland. Cecil Balmond's design, the *Caledonian Star* is set to sit near the small border town of Gretna over looking the M74 and will have estimated viewing figures of 10 million every year.

As an alternative to these monumental 'signposts' pieces of sculpture that herald regeneration projects and symbolize a community's sense of place there is Jeremy Deller's. 2001 'Battle of Orgreave' that provides a meaningful but uncomfortable artwork that reconstructs a sense of place and time. The Battle of Orgreave was conceived by Jeremy Deller, commissioned and produced by Artangel in association with Channel 4 and is a re-enactment of a decisive day of the miners strike.

“On 18th June 1984 I was watching the evening news and saw footage of a mass picket at Orgreave coking plant in South Yorkshire in which thousands of men were chased up a field by mounted police. The image of this pursuit stuck in my mind for years I wanted to find out what exactly happened on that day with a view to re-enacting or commemorating it in some way. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the strike, like a civil war, had a traumatically divisive effect at all levels of life in the UK.”¹⁰

Deller's work exists as a re-enactment, a book and a DVD that largely follows a documentary genre with interviews with miner, policeman and politicians combined with archive footage from 1984 and behind the scene footage of the re-enactment. Due to the sensitive nature of work and its potential to re-open old wounds as the event being constructed was in ‘living memory’ Deller and Artangel were prepared to call a halt to the project if local people felt hostile or antagonism towards the project or found it to be in bad taste. No such fear ever materialised but the communities affected by the re-enactment appreciated the opportunity to re-tell events, to correct media coverage of the events of 1984 and to remember without falling into nostalgia.

In considering both artists approach with regard to constructing a sense of place through the work that they have made I initially felt that one approach was better than the other but can see that both are important in their own way and whether they are assimilative or interruptive¹¹ in nature they are important in understanding how a sense of place is constructed

Notes

- ¹ David Harvey, et al., *Mapping The Futures, Local cultures, global change* (London, Routledge, 1993), 5.
- ² Edward Casey, *Getting Back into Place, Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indian University Press, 1993), ix.
- ³ Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, (London: Pion Limited, 1986), 6.
- ⁴ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford/Mass: Blackwell 1990), 355.
- ⁵ Ibid., 4.
- ⁶ Jeremy Millar and Tacita Dean (eds.), *Artworks: Place* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2005) 12.
- ⁷ Comments from a lecture and discussion delivered by Jeremy Millar at Sheffield Hallam University and further expanded in the accompany publication *Transmission: Host, Guest* Jeremy Millar, Host Andrew Sneddon, 2008.
- ⁸ Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, (California: University of California Press, 1997) xxi.
- ⁹ The Angel of the North, Public Art Team, Gateshead Council, July 2006, Viewed 15th July 2011, <http://www.gateshead.gov.uk/Leisure%20and%20Culture/attractions/Angel/Home.aspx>
- ¹⁰ Jeremy Deller, Forward to *The English Civil War Part II: Personal Accounts of the 1984-85 miners Strike*, (London Artangel 2001)
- ¹¹ Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, (Cambridge and London MIT Press 2004) 11

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Biographical note

Andrew Sneddon is a Scottish visual artist and holds an MA in Fine Art from Glasgow School of Art and has studied at the British School at Rome. He lectures in Fine Art at both Edinburgh College of Art and Sheffield Hallam University.